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AN INTERVIEW WITH RAY MILLIGAN

By: Bill Falkowski (Trap and Trial Magazine)

“On a dark desert highway cool wind in my hair, warm smell of colitas rising up through the air. Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light, my head grew heavy and my sight grew dim, I had to stop for the night”. While I can’t be sure of it, this song could have very well been being played on the radio in Ray Milligan’s old Nissan pickup as he ran his trapline back in 1977.

Anyone who’s old enough knows that the opening lines of this article are the lyrics to the popular song Hotel California by the Eagles. For those of you who aren’t old enough to remember, the year 1977 marked the start of what many like to call, “The Golden Age of Fur”. While he may not have known it at the time, Ray Milligan was about to make a season’s catch that in the eyes of the entire trapping community would make him far more popular than the Eagles rock band itself.

As elusive as the canines that the Chama, New Mexico resident traps, we finally caught up with him, and spent two hours talking, laughing, sharing trapping stories, and talking about life’s lessons. So, come along with us, and re-live the “Golden Age of Fur through the eyes of Ray Milligan.



Born in Pennsylvania, Ray admits to growing up in a non-hunting, non-trapping family. The year he was born, his parents bought an acre of land and as a youngster he remembers being able to walk out the door and in a hundred feet he could start hunting rabbits and pheasants. Ray’s grandparents were immigrants and couldn’t even speak English when they arrived in this country, but within five years his grandfather owned five of his own grocery stores. Ray prides

himself on being able to say he has been self employed his entire life along with his siblings and his parents. As a child, Ray lived a colorful life. His father owned a bar, and above the bar was a hotel, that Ray says they nick-named the “Heartbreak Hotel”. It was named this for the sole reason that at Christmas and Thanksgiving his father would clean out the bar and hotel, and bring home anyone that was there including divorcees, people that just had issues and ex-cons!

Ray started trapping at a young age. Like most youngsters, he trapped chipmunks in Victor rat traps, and by the time he was thirteen, he had graduated to opossums, skunks, and muskrats. Ray went to college in Slippery Rock Pennsylvania, and met up with a family named the Thompsons. The father was an avid water trapper and taught Ray how to catch, mink, muskrat, and beaver. The son, who was Ray’s age was a fox trapper, and he was the one who taught Ray how to trap, skin, flesh and stretch fox. Ray admits that eventually the son became really angry with Ray as he was catching ten times the fur that the son was.

After college, Ray and his wife Colleen headed West on their own. Toting a long beard and shoulder length hair, these “hippies”, according to Ray would make it no matter what. With no healthcare until he was thirty eight years of age, Ray delivered all of their children at home by himself. Stopping in Kansas for a few years, Ray trapped several thousand coyotes, and by the time they left, he had written permission on 205 farms. In the off season Ray and his wife would substitute teach as they both had teaching degrees. They were an integral part of the church and community. Ray tells of a rancher that he asked year after year to trap his ranch and it was always the same answer...“I know who you are, I know what you do, and I don’t like it”, the rancher would say. Six years later, the rancher said, “You’re part of the community, and our schools...just go trap”.

When asked who his mentors were over the years, Ray replies that he has millions of them. The two that stick out in his mind the most are Mike Marsyada and Tim Caven. Tim Caven, a longtime personal friend of Ray’s since they were in their twenties still comes down to New Mexico every year to hunt elk. They met each other at trappers convention in Iowa and have been friends ever since. Ray comes up to Minnesota quite often to fish walleyes with Tim. After interviewing the trapping legend, my phone buzzed me on February 18th, and it was a message from Tim and Ray displaying a huge walleye that the elk wrangler had caught on a fishing trip up in Minnesota just this past winter.

When Ray became known, he would write two thousand letters a year to mostly kids talking about trapping or answer questions that the kids had. When Ray started doing business with Dicks Sporting Goods, he went into his first meeting and introduced himself. The head buyer for the hunting division introduced himself to Ray and said, "I've read all your books, and I was a fifteen year old kid and you wrote me a two page letter answering all my trapping questions. Since that time, Ray has made all of Cabela's and Dicks Sporting Goods clothes wash, scent elimination products, and hunting scents. After twenty five years of doing business with these companies, Ray decided it was time to get out, and gave both Dicks Sporting Goods and Cabela's a substantial notice, and quit the business.

Anyone who is a trapper, or has trapped surely has seen the legendary photo of Ray Milligan with his fur displayed on an old barn. The photo is as legendary as the trapper himself, and when I asked him about the photo, and the numbers of animals on the barn, I was shocked. This is what the trapper had to say. "There are actually two photos. One of the photos was taken in December of 1981. The one picture shows the corner of a barn and one side of the barn is all coyotes and the other side is all coons, along with a few bobcat and a few fox. That was a huge year. It was 47 days of working all alone trapping, skinning, and fleshing". Ray shipped his fur to a branch of the Hudson Bay Fur Company that year and made \$27,000.00. At that time, you could buy a nice brick home in a subdivision with one acre for \$25,000.00. "I made that money in 47 days working by myself".

I asked the legendary trapper if he ever had a skinner, and he said that he had a skinner for two years in Kansas, but other than that, Ray skinned all of his own animals every single night. "It's the golden rule of trapping", he said. "As a longliner, you can never not skin at the end of a day. It will get a head of you, and then you're in trouble". Ray recalls being in his prime and being able to dress in his skinning clothes, skin, de-gland, and store ten coyotes in 70 minutes with the help of Chuck Berry. The trapper now in his 60's tells of a point in his life when he would reach a euphoric state of exhaustion. "It's the best feeling in the world", he said.

The next year is an even better year which is when the second picture is taken. It's his best year ever and it was a year when nothing went wrong. Ray admits to not remembering how many animals were on the first picture but the second picture features a man in his physical and mental prime that worked dawn to dusk by headlamp under perfect conditions until that fateful day in late January of 1983

when the fur market crashed. The barn Ray used the first time wasn't big enough the second time around so he found a barn on his trapline, and he and two buddies created the display consisting of 365 coyotes, 220 coon, a couple dozen bobcats and then the entire market crashed.

Ray loaded all of the furs in his pickup and headed north. He stopped in the Dakotas, Minnesota and finally found a buyer

in Chelsea, Iowa. He spent three days there and actually had a bunk at the buyer's facility. He made \$19,000.00 that year. The modern day golden age of fur had ended.

The ever popular Milligan Brand lures which are still made today have always been bottled by Ray himself. The legendary trapper is proud to say that his lure has always been bottled wherever he lives. No one has ever bottled his lures. Along with making lures and high end Milligan Brand Sweaters, the trapper has written several books. Coyote Fever which is not only Ray's favorite book but mine also, is referred to as "Ray's Freedom Machine". He named it this because it was at this point in his career that he had started to make money while he slept. Ray admits that the demand for a good book was there. There was no good information out there. Ray compiled the book over a period of two and a half years by talking into a tape recorder and learning as he went. Two years prior to the release of the book, Ray had never trapped a coyote. He was a quick study and paid attention to every detail. The book has sold 57,000 copies.

Ray got the rare opportunity in 1988 to trap the biggest ranch in New Mexico, the Ted Turner ranch for six years. The ranch consisted of 500 continuous sections. Ray actually got permission to trap the ranch by helping some veteran ranch hands fix fence. After that, Ray was granted permission. He asked the ranch hand if he had a map of the boundaries, to which he replied, "Just go trap, you'll never



reach the boundaries”. Ray admits he was right, in the six years he trapped the ranch, he never reached the boundaries of the property.

The year 1987 Ray considers his break over year. He is still trapping full time, but he starts outfitting that year and his first client and lifelong friend Tim Caven comes down to New Mexico and kills an elk with Ray. Milligan Brand Outfitters is born. The outfitting business started with just some of Ray’s hunting buddies as clients and grew into a monster business. Today, Ray has a staff of guys he calls the MB Men. The group consists of thirty of the grittiest, hard working guides, chefs, camp jacks, and wranglers in the western United States and they have had 300 clients a year for the last twenty years. Milligan Brand Outfitters is the biggest outfitter in the Western United States today.

In 2010, Ray dusted off his traps. With the Cabela’s corporate staff accompanying him, he started making his trapping DVD collection. Ray admits that it had been twenty plus years since he had trapped seriously due to the demands of the outfitting business. Ray’s wife Colleen was concerned, and asked him if he needed to practice ahead of time! Ray assured her that it was like riding a bike and that the coyotes hadn’t changed.



As the interview ended, I asked the legendary trapper what trapping has taught him over the years, to which he replied, “Trapping is the coolest thing in the world. It teaches you about the animals, and why they do the things they do. It teaches you responsibility, and it gives you the opportunity to test your physical and mental limits. When you couple all those things together you become independent. If you take it to the level that I took it, it teaches you how to be a business man as well”.

Over the years, Ray has had some unbelievable experiences. The once long haired hippie has collectively over the years slept 3000 nights under the stars. “Longlining is the best thing in world”, he said, speaking of days camping and trapping out of a wall tent, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and apples.